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AUTHOR DiStefano, Lynda A.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of maternal directive and nondirective styles of interaction on the emergence of verbal communicative intent in toddlers, and sought to understand the association between maternal interaction styles and young children's pragmatic acquisition. During free play, maternal utterances of 12 mother-child dyads, with children aged 25-29 months, were recorded. Utterances were coded as directive (signifying intent to elicit or modify the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of the child) or non-directive (providing new information or augmenting the verbal or nonverbal behaviors of the child). Children's utterances were coded as either expressing communicative intent or serving discourse functions. Results showed that: (1) children of mothers with directive interactive styles used "responding" with greater frequency and "requesting information" with less frequency than children of non-directive mothers; (2) maternal interaction style did not influence topic introduction and topic maintenance; and (3) children of non-directive mothers used a significantly more diverse vocabulary than children of directive mothers. In conclusion, behaviors are listed that may function as facilitative strategies for the development of communicative intent in children: parallel talk; reporting; imitation; expansion; and modeling. (Includes 11 references) (JDD)

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# Facilitating Effects of Directive and Non-directive Language on Toddler Language

| First Author | Second Author | Third Author |
|---|---|---|
| Lynda A. DiStefano | Anthony S. Bashir | Marie Chesnick |
| WalthamWeston Hospital | Emerson College | Boston University |
| EI Program | 100 Beacon Street | 605 Commonwealth Avenue |
| Hope Avenue | Boston, MA 02116 | Boston, MA 02215 |
| Waltham, MA 02254 | | |

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# Facilitating Effects of Directive and Non-Directive Language on Toddler Language

Numerous studies have addressed the relationship between mothers' language to their language learning children and the children's language development. Results of these studies suggest that although there are a number of important and different behaviors associated with mothers' language to their language learning toddlers, those that relate specifically to a non-directive, or descriptive style of maternal interaction are more conducive to child language that is semantically and syntactically enriched. The purpose of the present study was twofold. One was to examine the effects of maternal directive and non-directive styles of interaction on the emergence of verbal communicative intent in toddlers; and secondly, to contribute to our understanding of the association between maternal interaction styles and the influence on young children's pragmatic acquisition.

Specifically, the following questions were asked:

1. Does maternal interaction style influence the range of verbal communicative behaviors used by the child?

2. Does maternal interaction style influence the turn-taking pattern of the dyad?

3. Does maternal interaction style influence topic introduction and topic maintenance within the dyad?

4. Does maternal interaction style influence the child's vocabulary as measured by Type Token Ratio?

Twelve mother-child dyads were included in this study. The children ranged in age from 25-29 months and were in Brown's Stage II. All children had normal vision and hearing. English was the primary language spoken in the home, and the subjects represented a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Using transcriptions of audio recordings of each mother child dyad made during a free play situation, fifty consecutive maternal utterances were coded. A dialogue coding system was used to compare mothers' uses of directive and non-directive verbal behaviors. Directive utterances were those that signified intent to elicit or modify the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of the child, whereas, non-directive utterances provided new information or augmented the verbal or non-verbal behaviors of the child. Definitions and examples of these categories are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 of your handouts.

Utterances which were neither directive nor non-directive were classified separately, and examples of these are presented in Table 3.

Determination of the principal interaction style of a mother was based on a mother's high use of directive or non-directive utterances. The predominant interaction style of six of the mothers was directive and predominant interaction style of six was non-directive.

Reliability measures were obtained by another speech language pathologist who was unfamiliar with the study. Agreement was 90%.

The children's utterances were coded using a system was based on Halliday (1975) and Roth and Spekman (1984). The elements represented the main categories of communicative intent identified for toddlers of comparable linguistic levels and chronological age. Children's utterances were coded as either expressing communicative intents or serving discourse functions. For the purpose of this study, routines - such as recitation of nursery rhymes, rote counting, and phrases of songs - were not counted. Definitions and examples of this coding system are presented in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

The initial question asked was:

**Does maternal interaction style influence the range of verbal communicative behaviors used by the child?**

The distribution of the percentages of children's communicative intentions as defined in Tables 4 and 5, was compared. The two highest categories of children's utterances were responding and commenting, followed by naming and requesting. Mann-Whitney U tests were used to compare the performance of the children of mothers with non-directive styles with children of mothers with directive styles for these categories. The confidence levels were used to express the degree of relative sensitivity of the differences between the groups.

Of the categories evaluated, there were two statistically significant differences between the non-directive and directive groups; responding [($z = 1.28$, $p < .100$)] and requesting information [($z = 2.16$, $p < .015$)]. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups for naming, commenting, or requesting objects, action, help or protests.

With regard to question one and the findings just summarized, Kaiser and Blair (1987) suggested a model of inter-relatedness to interpret the communication behaviors within the mother-child dyad. They stated that a mother influences the child's communicative behavior, and the child in turn, influences the mother's communicative behavior. Using this model, precipitating and maintaining factors can be proposed for our reported effects.

Specifically, since children of mothers with directive interactive styles use responding behaviors with greater frequency than children of non-directive mothers, it may be that mothers' directive styles, characterized by high percentages of mands (non-yes/no questions) and models (instructions to verbalize), directly influence the child's productions since a child is obliged to respond under such conditions. A child's productions, in turn, may elicit more mands or models from mother. For example, if mother asks the child, "What is this?", and the child fails to respond or does so incorrectly, mother may recast the question or prompt the child with a phrase such as "Tell me."

Wetherby, Cain, Yonclas, and Walker (1988) discuss requesting information as a stage in the development of intentional communication, which usually emerges in toddlers as they enter the multiword stage. Our study suggests that children of non-directive mothers ask for information significantly more frequently than children of directive mothers. Mothers with a non-directive style seem to create a more balanced discourse as evidenced by Balance of Utterance Ratios and Mean Length of Turn. A condition of non-restraint, as suggested by Hubbell (1977), is perceived by the child, who then seems to be more comfortable to make requests of her communication partner. By addressing the child's request for information, the mother labels and comments which are characteristics of the non-directive style.

The second question asked was:

**Does maternal interaction style influence the turn-taking pattern of the dyad?**

The number of turns for the dyads was calculated as the Balance of Turn-taking Ratio; the total number of utterances was expressed as the Balance of Utterance Ratio; and Mean Length of Turn was calculated in standard fashion. There were no statistically different findings for these measures. However, the trends in the data suggest that Balance of Utterance Ratio, and Mean Length of Turn, were higher in the directive mother-child group. These mothers used more controlling behaviors which limited the number of opportunities their children had to participate in conversation. Non-directive mothers produced fewer utterances per turn, thus allowing their children to initiate turns more readily.

The third question was:

**Does maternal interaction style influence topic introduction and topic maintenance within the dyad?**

The answer to this question is no. Quantitatively, children of non-directive mothers performed similarly to children of directive mothers with regard to initiation, contingent remarks, and

placemarkers. Qualitatively, group data suggest differences. Although the number of initiations was comparable for the two groups of children, the pragmatic function of the initiations was different. For example, a rejection of a mother-motivated activity by requesting an alternate choice was coded as an initiation, while its pragmatic function was a protest. Perhaps this is not analogous to an initiation a child makes when commenting on something in his environment to which he wishes to direct the attention of his listener.

The final question was:

Does maternal interaction style influence the child's vocabulary as measured by Type Token Ratio?

Type Token Ratios for the two groups of children were compared using a Mann-Whitney U test [$z = 1.68$, $p < .047$]. These results indicate that children of non-directive mothers use a significantly more diverse vocabulary than their matched peers.

We suggest a reciprocal relationship which may account for the increased vocabulary diversity among the children of mothers who use non-directive styles. These mothers use comments and expansions that are semantically relevant and syntactically simplified, and their children request more information from their mothers. This process fosters vocabulary development by presenting additional opportunities for mothers to provide language and for children to experience that language within meaningful contexts. These observations are consistent with Hubbell's projection (1977), that non-directive mothers tend to expand their children's utterances and provide comments during ongoing activities. Therefore, their children are exposed to a variety of models which may help increase their receptive and expressive vocabularies. Finally, it has been suggested that mothers adjust their language to their children's increasing linguistic competencies providing them with more information as they mature. In this fashion, maternal language contributes to the child's acquisition of lexical items, and provides additional information for the child as the child demonstrates competency. This competency is inferred by the mothers

from the child's responses.

In conclusion, the following behaviors within a dyad may function as facilitative strategies for the development of communicative intent in children: (Table 2 of handouts)

1. parallel talk: i.e. labelling and commenting;
2. reporting: i.e. utterances that occur in the absence of referents;
3. imitation
4. expansion and
5. modelling.

Such behaviors are characteristic of a non-directive interactive style which provides information and augments the verbal and non-verbal behaviors of children and are associated frequently with increased linguistic capabilities in children.

The body of literature which describes interactional styles within a therapeutical context notes that the principal characteristics of a traditional therapy session are comparable to those outlined as "directive" maternal interaction styles. With this in mind, clinicians can monitor their own styles of interaction in order to provide their young clients with an opportunity to practice what they know, while

being exposed to more advanced forms with the result being more efficient communicators.

# Facilitating Effects of Directive and Non-directive Language on Toddler Language


| First Author | Second Author | Third Author |
|---|---|---|
| Lynda A. DiStefano<br>WalthamWeston Hospital<br>EI Program<br>Hope Avenue<br>Waltham, MA 02254 | Anthony S. Bashir<br>Emerson College<br>100 Beacon Street<br>Boston, MA 02116 | Marie Chesnick<br>Boston University<br>605 Commonwealth Avenue<br>Boston, MA 02215 |


Table 1 - Directive Maternal Utterances

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Mands: a. non - yes/no questions<br>b. instructions to verbalize<br>(Hubbell,1977) | Wh questions<br>"Tell me what that is." |
| Imitative prompt (Model):<br>instruction to repeat target<br>word modelled by adult (Hubbell, 1977) | "Say cup." |
| Imperatives: a. prescriptives-<br>commands made in an attempt<br>to direct the child's behavior<br>(Kretschmer, 1983) | "Put the doll on the chair." |
| b. proscriptives-commands made<br>in an attempt to inhibit the<br>child's behavior or verbalizations | "Don't throw the doll." |
| c. suggestion-indirect<br>commands which make a<br>recommendation or propose an<br>alternative to the child<br>(Della Corte, et al., 1983) | "It might work better if you put it here." |
| Corrections: a. referential-<br>corrects child's label for an<br>object, person, action or concept | "That's a dog...not a cat." |
| b. phonological-corrects the<br>child's pronunciation of a word<br>(Della Corte et al., 1983) | "Car, not 'tar'." |

Table 2 - Non-Directive Maternal Utterances

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Parallel Talk (Duchan & Weitzner-Lin, 1987): a. label-naming people, objects, or actions (Della Corte, et al.,1983) | "Ball" or "That's a ..." |
| b. comments-utterances that occur when the referent is manifest and function to describe behavior, actions, feelings, appearance, etc. (Bondurant et al., 1983) | "Mom's buttoning your shirt." |
| Report: utterances that occur in the absence of referents and are informative statements directed to a listener (Bondurant et al., 1983) | "Daddy will fix it tonight." |
| Imitation: any utterance that repeats exactly, or in part, one of the child's utterances of a preceding turn (Cross, 1977) | C: "Man in." M: "Man in." |
| Expansion: any utterance that incorporates additional material with an imitation of a child's preceding utterance (Cross, 1977) | C: "On." M: "Put hat on." |
| Modelling: those utterances in which the adult comments on the child's utterance and in doing so does not repeat any lexical items from the child's production (Bondurant et al., 1983) | C: "Funny." M: "He's very silly." |

Table 3

Maternal Utterances Neither Directive nor Non-Directive

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Maternal Self-Repetitions: a. exact repetition - an exact sequential repetition of any preceding maternal utterance | M: "No more?" M: "No more?" |
| b. partial repetition - an utterance which repeats any phrase (or phrases) of a preceding maternal utterance, but is not an exact repetition (Snow, 1972) | M: "Want up?" M: "Up?" |
| Acceptance: an utterance which explicitly indicates acceptance of what the child says or does (Bondurant et al., 1983) | "That's right." |

Table 3 - continued

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Rejection: an utterance which explicitly indicates rejection of what the child says or does (Bodurant et al., 1983) | "No." |
| Conventional social expressions: Polite, conventional expressions used in social interactions (Della Corte et al., 1983) | "Thank you." |
| Social Play: Interactions with the child in a playful manner (Della Corte, et al., 1983) | Peek-a-boo, noises, etc. |
| Fillers: Words that do not convey any referential meaning and appear to be used as automatic responses (Della Corte et al., 1983) | "Uh-oh", "mmm" |
| Other: Any utterance that cannot be categorized as any of the above | |

Table 4 - Utterances Expressing Communicative Intent

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Requesting Object: a. present-utterances that solicit an object that is present in the environment<br>b. absent-utterances that solicit an absent object<br>(Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "That." or "Want that."<br>"Ball." (Child looking for item) |
| Requesting Action: Utterances that solicit an action be initiated or continued (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "More." or "Me swing." |
| Requesting Assistance: Vocalizations that solicit adult intervention/help (Halliday, 1975) | "Help me." or "Can't do it." |
| Protesting/Rejecting: Utterances that express objection to ongoing or impending actions/events (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "My truck." (In response to toy being taken) |
| Naming. Common and proper nouns that label people, objects, events, and locations (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "Dog" |

Table 4 - continued

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Commenting: Utterances that describe physical attributes of objects, events, and people, including size, shape, and location; observable movements and actions of objects and people; and utterances that refer to attributes which are not immediately observable such as possession and usual location. These utterances need not be contingent upon previous utterances. (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "My ball." or "Big truck." |

Table 5 - Utterances with Discourse Function

| Definitions | Example |
|---|---|
| Requesting Information: Utterances that solicit information about an object, action, person, or location. Marked by rising intonation. (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "Shoe?" or "What that?" |
| Responding: Utterances that directly complement preceding utterances that are obligatory in nature (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "Cow." (In response to "Who says moo?") |
| Attention Seeking: Utterances that solicit attention to the child or to aspects of the environment (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "Look!" or "Mommy!" |
| Greeting: Utterances that express salutations and other conventionalized rituals of leave-taking (Roth and Spekman, 1984) | "Bye-bye." |
| Imitation: a. exact repetition-an exact sequential repetition of any preceding utterance | M: "Block go in." C: "Block go in." |
| b. partial repetition-an utterance which repeats any phrase (or phrases) of a preceding utterance, but is not an exact repetition (Snow, 1972) | M: "Block go in." C: "Go in." |
| Other: any utterance that can not be categorized as any of the above | Fillers, social expressions, unintelligible utterances, etc. |

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| Lynda A. DiStefano | Anthony S. Bashir | Marie Chesnick |
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| Waltham, MA 02254 | | |


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